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ABSTRACT

This essay examines the relationships between teaching and visual media over the last several hundred years, particularly the concept of illusion. The teacher as magician or shaman is explored and compared to contemporary theories of instruction and the use of media such as television, films, and slides. The teacher as artist and alchemist is also discussed with reference to the visual heritage that characterizes their thinking on man and the universe. Revolutionary changes brought by the 20th Century to the sciences and the arts are considered in relation to the role of educators, and visual literacy is discussed in the context of art education and the role of corporations. (Author/JD)

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CURRICULUM: MANAGED VISUAL REALITY

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CURRICULUM: MANAGED VISUAL REALITY

Illusions - false mental images or comceptions which may be misinterpretations of a real appearance or may be things imagined. They may be pleasing, harmless, or even useful.

The teacher for thousands of years had been considered a magician. As medicine man, shaman, or alchemist, he was thought to possess powers or special knowledge that enabled him to cast spells, foretell the future and alter conditions or realities. The teacher was the master of the cultural, intellectual and spiritual schools of the tribes of antiquity. A medium of the supernatural, he could pass on the prevailing culture, myths, or reality or change these elements through certain magic so that a new reality or way of life could be brought into being.

This transcendence of the intuition of the shaman to the everyday lives of the tribe members took the form of tuition that included: rites of passage, special rituals, initiations to secret orders, sharing of meaningful visual symbols or illusions of the conditions of a new reality. This tuition was expressed through dance, music, verbal pronouncements and very often painted or drawn visual representations. These paintings or markings visually portrayed the actions of the hunt and were magic. Not only did they teach the hunter the skills of hunting, they created a "reality double". This "reality double" convinced the hunters that what happens in the visual representation will happen in real life. The "reality double" developed into such a bond between the visual symbols and the psychological beliefs of the tribe members that for all practical purposes no difference existed between the visual representation and real-life events and situations.

Even though this association between the symbolized and the actualized was born in the psyche of prehistoric man, there is some evidence suggesting that this belief in the "reality double" persists even today. Perhaps it explains the fear still observed in some cultures of being photographed. Or, possibly it accounts for modern advertising which depends heavily on consumers' beliefs that the visual symbols or illusions of being beautiful, sexy, having cars, and things can be transcended to the everyday lives of the viewer/ consumer of the Madison Avenue visual reality.

In the Middle Ages, alchemists also created visual symbols: geometric shapes, animals, and supernatural beasts and designs, that tried to portray a new reality. Their paradoxical vision of the universe had mixed, in varying proportions, elements of the physical world and the imagined characteristics of the mystical and spiritual forces of the cosmos.

The alchemists, in many ways, were prophets of our modern age. They invented the idea that base metals could be turned into gold. (This mutation is now possible through the application of nuclear physics.) They discovered that reality is not just that which is perceived with the physical senses it is also defined with the individual's interpretation. (Physists in the Twentieth Century would reintroduce this idea.) Alchemists contended that there was a psychic content to all the perceptions of reality. (This notion predicted Freud's discovery of the subconscious.) Their description of the existence of forces of good and evil, light and dark and the worldly and the cosmic is very similar to current theories on the role of the subconscious as it filters the senses and effects thoughts and behaviors. Alchemists believed that every man is part woman and every woman part man. They often characterized both sexes as hermaphrodite. (This hundreds of years before the physiological proof of the

existence of the glandular and chromosomal explanations for both male and female components in individuals. They elaborated many schemes for creating Homunculus - a man in a flask. (This - the original test-tube baby.) The philosophers stone was also their unique idea - a stone with all knowledge. (A sort of granite computer.) Their ideas have been, perhaps, the basis for some modern scientific discoveries. In a sense, the new visions they foretold through highly visual symbols became conscious to the historical mind of man and a component of a new view of the universe - a new reality.

Hieronymus Bosch, (1450-1516), the Flemish painter and alchemist, taught the culture of his time the amazing possibilities of a world that is both natural and supernatural, a world filled with all wonderous things and people that are simultaneously good and evil, dark and light, metal and flesh, alive and dead. His visual representations of the universe are filled with overt and covert visual symbols of new realities.

Johann Amos Comenius, (1592-1670), a Moravian bishop and educator, and a contemporary of the alchemists was influenced by their paradoxical views. He created a schooling plan for vocational and spiritual training that was to be provided uniformly across classes by the state. He even wrote a text for the plan.

The "orbis pictus" contained elaborate pictures of people at work referenced with numerical designations and descriptions. The text is very much like a modern vocational education programmed learning workbook. Comenius shared his contemporaries' attraction to highly-charged visual symbols and their interest in altering things and people as if things and people can be arranged, divided or enchanted to form more useful or valuable elements of a mystical yet temporal sphere. Lead to Gold!

His plan for uniform schools with state support and direction with a curriculum for the vocational and spiritual has become an accepted arrangement in many nations. As Ellwood Cubberley, a classical educational historian, has noted: "The germ of almost all eighteenth and nineteenth century educational theory is to be found in his work." (1:415)

The role of the teacher changed drastically with the advent of mass schooling. As schooling came to be extended to all classes of society generally to promote developing political, economic and religious institutions, no longer was the teacher defined as magical, capable of prompting the tribe members to transcend their accepted reality, but was redefined as an agent of a new institution - the school.

At the beginning of the Twentieth Century, a set of circumstances occurred simultaneously that brought about a revival of interest in redefining reality - a renaissance of alchemic knowledge. First, the laws of atomic physics were discovered that changed forever man's notion of the nature of matter. No longer could the idea of an absolute fixed reality be tolerated. This in turn prompted a new view of the world that is ordered by paradoxical rules - rules that address microcosms and macrocosms with ever conflicting truths. As a case in point, Niels Bohr reported that when measuring the things of reality, personal judgement is <u>always</u> required to identify and interpret a subject.(5:307) In other words, there is no absolute, no such thing as a quantifiable or qualifiable reality. The best scientists can do regarding the contents of the universe is to speculate on things and processes with limited measuring devices and techniques.

At the same time these remarkable discoveries in nuclear physics were taking place, the science of psychology and psychiatry were born. These new fields of inquiry were based on the premise that there is a part of the brain, the subconscious,

that is essentially obscured, that effects thoughts and behaviors. The acceptance of the existence of the subconscious caused the idea that there is in fact an extranatural or mystical aspect of man. Too, the acceptance of the existence of the subconscious with its unmeasurable effect on perception precluded the possibility of defining reality through perceptions and reason alone.

The physicist, Wolfgang Pauli, (5:307) related the space-time continuum of physics to collective conscious as both being aspects of the same reality behind appearances. In other words, the world as defined by the new physics and the new fields of psychology and psychiatry have in common the same general characteristic that they are based on the notion that there is always a reality or realities obscured behind that which is immediately observed and accepted - layers upon layers of illusions.

The artists of the turn of the century were also trying to redefine reality or at least to understand it. They shared with the alchemists an interest in expressing symbolically their visions of new realities that were "abstract", lacking in absolutes, full of light and dark, good and evil, impressions and contradictions. This art of the time often termed "surrealist" or beyond the real,portrayed the people and objects of the world as containing various aspects - some easily observed with commonally accepted characteristics and some obscure only identifiable as the subjects are altered or juxtaposed with contrasting subjects or circumstances.

The paintings of Salvador Dali, Rene Magritte, and others are excellent examples of this attempt to create the"surreal" and to investigate the various aspects of people and objects by mutating and juxtaposing subjects and circumstances. So a melting clock says something more about time and space than highly representational symbols.

Other parallel interests between the artist of the Twentieth Century and the alchemists of the Middle Ages are evident. There are numerous examples of using symbolic representations of the mystical and magical, and many cases of attempts to explain realities through geometric shapes, mythical beasts, and supernatural designs. Artists of both eras were interested in visually deriving the spirit of things and people. This mysterious spirit was called "Mercurius" by the alchemists.

The Twentieth Century artists re-invented ways to define realities that moved farther and farther away from purely representational art to highly symbolic visual renditions of the universe. What appeared very abstract however proved quite similar to actual photographs of matter revealed through micro-photography.

Even though scholars of physics and psychology played a major role in altering the accepted view of reality, it was the artists, in the spirit of Hieronymus Bosch and the alchemists, that became the new teachers. They assumed the historical role of the teacher as shaman, magician or medicine man - the one who prompts man to transcend accepted realities.

Artists as teachers have seen the art as process and content would provide entry to the world of imagination, feelings, dreams, creativity and a heightened awareness of the interior and exterior aspects of the self, other people and things. Thus a totally new view of the world - almost a reverse image of the school-defined reality would emerge for learners. To legitimatize this position, artists like Robert Kent have argued: "... we as art educators have a particularily important role to play in this attempt to balance education. In light of recent scientific findings, artists, art educators and young children involved in art no longer need feel the slightest inhibition in resisting the

myth that rationality is superior to sensitivity, or in pointing out that this myth leads to a half-brained educational product." (2:2)

Their arguments for looking at the world in a new way have often been grounded in partially documented theories of the structure of the brain. The brain, as they note, consists of two hemispheres, the left and the right. The left attends to reading, writing, figuring and talking. The right, mostly ignored in contemporary instruction and thus underdeveloped, deals with nonverbal and configuration processing. In order to promote the possibility of viewing new worlds, worlds of non-linear, irrational and illogical characteristics, artists have advocated new attention to the implementation of curriculum and instruction based on art activities.

While there has been no pervasive effort to develop art as curriculum and instruction designed to develop the abilities of the right hemisphere of the brain and the resultant specific skills in configuration and non-verbal processing, the Eastman Kodak Company and the Polaroid Corporation and other media businesses have promoted a curriculum based on a relatively new notion: "visual literacy".

This interest in redefining literacy is shared by many artists/teachers who deem this movement a way of re-inforcing their earlier concern with the development of the right hemisphere of the brain. Thus, if being literate requires certain discrimination and interpretation skills dependent upon a training in visual perception, the artist/teacher's original intent i.e., providing entry to the world of imagination, dreams, creativity and the awareness of the interior and exterior aspects of the self, other people and things, will be realized.

Some of these new realities, however, may be confounded by dramatic illusions. In Wilson Key's(3)provacative book: Subliminal Seduction, the character of visual mass media as perpetrating a conscious and subconscious visual reality is identified. Key state "The basis of modern media effectiveness is a language

within a language - one that communicates to each of us at a level beneath our conscious awareness, one that reaches into the uncharted mechanism of the human unconscious. This is a language based upon the human ability to subliminally or subconsciously or unconsciously perceive information. This is a language that today has actually produced the profit base for North American mass communication media. It is virtually impossible to pick up a newspaper or magazine, turn on a radio or television set, read a promotional pamphlet or the telephone book, or shop through a supermarket without having your subconscious purposely massaged by some monstrously clever artist, photographer, writer or technician." (3:11)

Key portrays the visual mass media as creating an illusion of reality both consciously and unconsciously. He couples various theories of the subconscious with current illustrations of art and photography. Many cases of universal symbols or words being embeded in visual representations are seen in Key's examples. He cites case after case of words or symbols representing heavy themes such as sex, death, anxiety, hate and perversions being incorporated in art and photography advertising visuals in magazines and on television in such a way that they are readily perceived by the subconscious.

His contention that mass media, especially television, and other visual media are the paramount behaviorial management elements of business and government coupled with the prospect that this control is being carried on without individual's awareness is most menacing. And, as Key notes - "Subliminal languages are not taught in schools." (3:11)

The prospect of a total visual curriculum for mass education engineered by centrally controlled mass media is gastly. But, if part of such a visual curriculum is also hidden, transmitting obscured messages for subconscious perception only, the implications are monsterous indeed.

But as there was an essential similarity between alchemists and modern artists, there is an association between current subliminal messages and the hidden symbols art of the 15th and 16th centuries. Termed "Anamorphosis", the hidden messages in art and architecture of the Middle Ages gave additional or covert meanings to the visual representations. These messages were political, aesthetic, or sometimes "pornographic". Like modern subliminals they sometimes operated below the level of conscious awareness.

Illusions have been used continually through history to alter realities - sometimes for malecious ends other times for beneign results. Illusions have been wonderous tools in hands of the magicians, shamans, alchemists - teachers. Todays teacher, like his magical ancestor, must rely on his own magic and symbols - to offer up new realities - to evoke the visions of new worlds mindful that illusions can be paradoxical - true or false, good or evil.

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